



Kinship, Affinity and Connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives

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Abstract

Drawing on the 2008 Mass Observation Directive 'Doing Family Research', this article explores the role of genealogy in personal lives from the perspective of genealogists and non-genealogists in the UK. Analysing the ends to which genealogy is put, it finds that genealogy is a key kinship practice, mapping connectedness, offering a resource for identity-work, and allowing belonging in time. Engaging with anthropological work on kinship, relatedness and remembrance and with recent sociological work on identity and affinity, this article explores how family history as a creative and imaginative memory and kinship practice is simultaneously used to map affinities and connectedness, enact relatedness, and produce self-identity. It argues that examining the role of genealogy and the genealogical imaginary reveals that conventional as well as non-conventional kinship produces partial and insecure identities. This compels everyday personal engagement with the meaning and legacy of inheritance for collective and individual identification and identity.

Keywords

affinity, belonging, connectedness, family history, genealogy, identity, kinship, Mass Observation, personal life, relatedness

Introduction: the Decline of the Family?

The decline of the western family has been much remarked on, seemingly evidenced through rising rates of divorce and single parenthood. At the same time, the meaning of family relationships seems diminished. Lawler notes that many argue that:

... kin ties have a weakened place in the production of identities. The emphasis on an allegedly plastic, adaptive self, suited to global networks, suggests that the self is no longer produced through the (relatively) local networks of family and kin. (2008: 34)

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However, as Lawler observes, such proclamations are premised on a traditional and 'archaic' definition of the family, mis-reading changed family forms as evidence of the redundancy of the family itself. Moving beyond a focus on family to an engagement with kinship, which explores 'relatives connected to one another without any supposition of what kind of social group or family they make up' (Strathern, 2005: 167) allows us to explore 'the kinds of kin relationships that people really engage in' (Mason, 2008). Far from the 'zombie' category evacuated of social and personal meaning Beck describes, people find kinship fascinating (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Mason, 2008). Carsten notes that kinship plays an important role as 'an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative energy, and their new imaginings' (2004: 9). Kinship remains central to personal lives in the West, and one key example of widespread public and personal engagements with kinship is manifest in the seemingly unprecedented boom in the family heritage industry.

Accounting for Genealogy

With few exceptions, the question repeatedly posed in relation to genealogy has been why are people interested in genealogy and why do they pursue these projects? Various social explanations for the boom in genealogy in the USA and the UK have been advanced. The surge in interest has been characterized as a reaction to depersonalized modernity and mobile lifestyles (Basu, 2004), social dislocation and/or migration (Erben, 1991) or a response to a crisis in belonging in postcolonial societies (Basu, 2005). Others have pointed to the boom in family history representing a weakening of family bonds (Basu, 2004) or, at the very least, evidence of public concern over the durability of the family (Taylor, 1982). Personal advantage and the desire to make connections with others feature prominently as explanations for people's reasons in pursuing genealogical research.

Accounts of genealogical research stress its importance for self-making, self-exploration and self-understanding (Basu, 2005; Bishop, 2005; Nash, 2005; Saar, 2002). Genealogy is characterized as a selective process of inclusion and exclusion (Basu, 2005; Jerrome, 1996; Nash, 2005), offering ontological security (Basu, 2005) or allowing genealogists to deal with grief, depression and a lack of self-esteem (Champagne, 1990). In personalizing the past (Lambert, 1996), genealogy accounts for the self in the present, signifies existence and provides meaning (Erben, 1991) whilst allowing the self to connect beyond and of itself (Basu, 2005). However, despite the popularity and visibility of genealogical research globally and nationally, the subject is both under-researched and under-theorized, with little sociological data collected on the phenomenon.

Smart has argued that we need to develop a sociology of personal life to explore what most matters in the fabric of everyday personal (and family) lives but remains for the most part unexplored sociologically. What we might need then, she states, is a 'connect-*edness thesis*' which develops a new 'language ... able to incorporate the intangible elements of connection and emotion' (2007: 188) in personal lives. Instead of asking what motivates genealogical investigations, this article, as well as the larger Leverhulme-funded research project from which it springs, responds to Smart's suggestion by looking to anthropological insights into kinship, relatedness and remembrance and to recent sociological work on identity and affinity, to explore what role genealogy plays in personal lives.

Specifically, following Mason's call for a sociological engagement with kinship which explores real life experiences (2008) and using responses from a Mass Observation Directive on family history commissioned by the author, this article explores how genealogy and the genealogical imaginary is deployed to enact relatedness and construct kinship, exploring how genealogy functions as 'part of an active and culturally specific production of the self' (Smart, 2007). It understands genealogy as a creative and imaginative memory practice which produces kinship, auto/biographical selves and interiorities, making visible the simultaneous process of self-making and the embedding of the self in kinship networks. Using Mason's typology of affinities (2008), this article traces how genealogy expresses both communality *and* individuality, connectedness *and* separation (Erben, 1991, emphasis added), by exploring the legacy and meaning of inheritance for self-identity in personal lives.

'Doing' Kinship

Strathern argues that 'kinship – or what English people refer to as family or relatives – is conventionally taken as embodying primordial ties that somehow exist outside or beyond the technological and political machinations of the world' (1992: 11). However, kinship through blood is not a natural relationship, but a social relationship, 'figured in terms of biological connection' (Nash, 2005). The advent of reproductive technologies means that 'what is taken to be natural has itself become a matter of choice' (Carsten, 2004: 167). Drawing on anthropology, and in particular Schneider's *American Kinship*, Lawler notes:

Blood *symbolizes* connection: it is not itself connection ... [it] enables Americans (and Europeans) to build cultural relations of kin. Kin relations are, *by definition*, cultural. Kin are quite simply those persons we *recognize* as kin. (2008: 38–9, emphasis in original)

Thus kinship, and relatedness, understood as a way of constituting relationships, has to be made meaningful through what Lawler and Carsten describe as creative identity-work. This involves locating the self and related others within a kin system on the basis of notions of inheritance. This process is not prescriptive, but creative, since as Lawler notes: 'some traits ... [can] be disowned and others embraced' (2008: 39). Further, there is a distinction between the rhetoric of kinship, where blood ties remain meaningful and of primary importance, and the practice of kinship, which may privilege time and community over connections through blood (see Carsten, 2000a; Tyler, 2005). Thus, although blood relationships are understood to be particularly significant, the boundaries between the social and the biological are 'permeable' (Carsten, 2000a), while the meaning and legacy of inheritance is contested and contestable. Thus kinship and relatedness remain negotiated and negotiable (Carsten, 2000a).

Kinship, Genealogy and the (Fractured) Self

However, kinship does not simply involve embedding the self within relationships. Following Erben, Lawler suggests that kinship is itself central to the production of individuality and uniqueness in the West. She argues that it might be through '*kinship itself*'

that people find 'a way through the apparent contradiction between individualism and the collective ties of kin identities' (2008: 35, emphasis in original). This is because 'the very idea of individualism comes *from* relationships and their social meaning and, in that sense, is produced *by* kinship' (Finch and Mason, 2000: 18, emphasis in original). Kinship is therefore also intrinsic to personhood (Carsten, 2004).

Research in cases of 'non-conventional' kinship (for example, donor insemination and adoption) where absent or unknown parents are traced, have shown that personhood in these cases is often described as fractured, partial and/or inauthentic, provoking a form of 'identity crisis' (Lawler, 2008). As Carsten notes, 'this suggests a notion of personhood where kinship is not simply added to bounded individuality, but one where kin relations are perceived as intrinsic to the self' (2004: 106–7). Thus, complete personal biographies and histories are required to become a complete person (Carsten, 2000b), even if those tracing birth kin do not necessarily achieve ontological security as a result (see Carsten, 2004: 104). The importance of 'knowing one's origins' highlights that the development of self does not begin at birth but with one's ancestors (Lawler, 2008: 42).

Kinship networks also include both the living and the dead. Genealogy in particular affords an opportunity to work through the grief and loss of dead kin, both in terms of working through and making creative meaning of 'depletion and pain', but also rearranging and regenerating the meaning of the past (Carsten, 2007: 16). Bear, for example, describes how retrieving dead kin through genealogy can offer 'the possibility of asserting connections between generations, to a place and with the past in general' (2007: 37). However, these kin systems are not boundless. Despite the fact that 'English images of kin relatedness include limitless chains of relatives stretching back to remote ancestries', (Edwards and Strathern, 2000: 154), in practice 'social exhaustion intervenes' (2000: 160). Thus, crucially, certain kin are forgotten or disowned, but can be 'claimed back through resurrected biological links' (2000: 160). It is this process of reclamation, as well as simultaneous selectivity and exclusion, that is so central to genealogical projects.

Kinship and the Dimensions of Affinity

Genealogy plays a central role in identity-projects and the forging of individuality within a collective context. Meanwhile, Mason argues that 'to ask what is fascinating about kinship requires that we know or find out what is its character, how is it experienced (sic) and what people think kinship and kin relationships are' (2008: 32). Drawing on anthropological understandings of kinship discussed above, she offers a typology of kinship based on four dimensions of affinity, 'axes' or 'dimensions' around which kinship is negotiated 'which represent different ways of imagining and practising relatedness' (2008: 32). The first affinity she labels *fixed affinity*, which is often conflated with the 'biological' and linked to resemblances. However, Mason notes that 'resemblances do not reduce to biology', given that biological connection does not inevitably result in visible resemblances. Further, given that resemblances are transmitted across the generations, sometimes 'apparently ly[ing] dormant and then reappear[ing] unexpectedly in subsequent generations', fixed affinities are meaningful only through taking 'the long view' (2008: 34). However, fixity itself contains 'layers of electivity'. For example, genealogical research offers 'a thrilling "detective" style engagement between personal electivity

(for example, in choices about which connections to trace and how to interpret the “evidence”) and inevitability in what is “there” to be found’ (2008: 36).

This relates to the second dimension of kinship, *negotiated, creative* affinities. Even fixed affinities are articulated through a creative process of negotiation where ‘people do not have a completely free hand to create what they desire, but neither do they simply follow geneticist or biological versions of kinship, origin and consequence’ (Mason, 2008: 37). Thus fixity is constructed through negotiation and creativity. The third dimension of affinity Mason calls *ethereal affinities*. These are ‘mysterious, magical, psychic, metaphysical, spiritual and, above all, *ethereal* – matters that are considered beyond (rational) explanation’ (2008: 37). This relates to the ‘other worldly nature of kinship’ which involves the magical and inexplicable, outside personal choice, but nevertheless possessing ‘a manifestly tangible and palpable existence, even though this may be transitory and interpretive’ (2008: 40). The fourth dimension of affinity is *sensory affinity*. This includes affinities ‘that are physical, bodily, material’ and which forge connections between bodies through, for example, smell, touch, and sound. Fixed, creative and ethereal affinities can have sensory manifestations, while ethereal affinities can feel ‘fixed’. Therefore these affinities ‘intersect and overlap’, representing ‘relational associations’, rather than ‘opposite points on a continuum’ (2008: 42).

The Mass Observation Project¹

In its current incarnation, the Mass Observation Project, based at the University of Sussex, issues directives or themed ‘writing tasks’ (Sheridan, 1993: 30) on various themes two to three times a year to volunteer writers, known as correspondents, who write anonymously about aspects of their everyday life. Directive responses are accompanied by a mini-biography which details age, sex, occupation and place of residence. The panel currently numbers around 525 people, some of whom have been writing continuously since 1981. While the recruitment criteria for the panel aim ‘to maintain a broad and diverse cross-section of “ordinary people”’ (Bytheway, 2005: 467), the data are not representative of the UK population. There are more contributions from women and from older people, while correspondents tend to be concentrated in the south of England. What unites the correspondents is their identification as ‘ordinary people’ (Purbrick, 2003) or ‘the people’s representatives’ (Shaw, 1998), providing ‘insights into the subjective experiences of people through their own narration’ (Sheridan, 1996: 15). It provides a rich source of qualitative material, in terms of quantity, quality and depth. Although fragmentary and characterized by a lack of finality, the accounts offer extremely rich, embedded and contextualized descriptions of social life, marked by a sense of collaboration and intimacy.

The form of writing which the directives generate cannot be easily characterized. It has been described as life history work, as ‘collective autobiography’ (Sheridan, 1993) and as personal testimony and social observation. There is also considerable variety in how correspondents respond to the directives, the styles of writing employed, and the different types of knowledge and contexts of knowledge drawn upon. Correspondents are often extremely reflexive about the nature and form of their engagement with the directive and the archive more broadly. The traffic is not one-way, from archivist/researcher

to correspondent: directive themes are often contested or their form challenged by correspondents. Correspondents respond to an imagined audience, in relationship with an imagined archive and/or researcher, much as the researcher responds to an imagined social identity based on the correspondent's mini-biography. This means the researcher must pay close attention to how the correspondents define the terms used in the directive, as well as exploring how the wording of the directive influences the kind of responses received. Thus we should understand the material, and the academic outputs which draw upon it, as 'a creative, collective project' (Shaw, 1998: 10).

The 2008 Family History Directive

In 2008 I commissioned the Part 1 Summer directive on Family History Research. This asked correspondents why family history was popular, who does it, what questions it answers, which groups are most interested in it, the relationship between family history and history more generally, and how people 'do' family history. It also asked what correspondents found interesting or memorable – or uninteresting – in media coverage of genealogy. Lastly, the directive asked for accounts of family history research in the correspondents' own lives and/or the lives of their families. Directives were sent out on 1 September 2009 to 525 separate individuals, and 219 responses had been received by mid-March the following year.

The responses are typically two pages of word-processed text which closely follow the structure of the prompts given in the directive. But they vary considerably, from the male 81 year old's one-line: 'I'm afraid that I cannot submit an entry to this topic as I find it almost indescribably boring'² (B1989) to 25 pages of handwritten text, complete with photograph. Some reject the directive prompts entirely, while almost all responses reveal a relationship with the meaning and purpose of the archive and a relationship with the commissioner. One retired woman (no age given) forces herself to engage with the subject, despite her lack of interest: 'For the first time in my twenty odd years of contributing, I can find nothing of the remotest interest in the themes, still, here goes ...'³ (B1180). Some are critical of the directive wording or assumptions. One male 78 year old writes: 'I am ... worried about some of the questions asked ... I cannot see that my views are anything more than my individual opinion'⁴ (B2710). Others are pleased with the directive theme for personal reasons. For example, a 70-year-old woman comments: 'This Directive, when I saw it, raised a wry smile because my husband, B, is into FHR [family history research] in a big way. It is his constant topic of conversation and it is driving us up the wall'⁵ (P1326). Another woman born in the 1920s writes: 'What a subject! I could bore for England on it'⁶ (P2138). Many of the responses also express a personal relationship with the researcher, expressing regret if they cannot engage as fully with the directive theme as the researcher might have anticipated. A 78-year-old woman writes regretfully: 'Sorry, I don't do [family history research] ... Sorry I can't be of more help'⁷ (R1760).

Connecting with Kin through Genealogy

A fascination with kinship, as well as the denial of its relevance, is apparent throughout the directive responses. Genealogy is a resource through which connections through

blood are made, and re-made, meaningful. It is a tool through which to bring living kin closer, by pursuing joint projects or sharing information found with close family, or by producing kinship, that is, rendering blood connections visible and making them meaningful, and by reuniting long lost branches of the family through e-mail or reunions. Genealogy is also described as a way to 'bring back' the dead, both those known and unknown in a person's lifetime. It was striking how often genealogy was accompanied by grieving and loss, and used to 'manage' grief. One 52-year-old woman commented that as well as feeling grief on the death of her mother, she had also lost memories too⁸ (C2888). Genealogy in this correspondent's case was used as a way of affirming and maintaining the continued importance of a relationship with someone who has died.

Accounting for the Meaningfulness of Blood Connections

For some correspondents, the meaningfulness of blood connections generated through genealogy is common sense and requires no explanation. One male 38-year-old notes without explanation:

I've had an instant connection with anyone I've met that shares my bloodline. It's almost as if we already know each other without having met before. The feeling of comfort and ease with the person is immediate.⁹ (N3171)

For others, and for the majority of correspondents, this is an understanding which requires justification. Finding out about past ancestors, for example, is accounted for by one female 58-year-old as an attempt to explore the self through identification with inherited characteristics: 'We inherit our looks, our behavioural patterns, diseases, our strengths and our weaknesses. We are the sum of those who went before'¹⁰ (W1813).

Another 61-year-old woman comments in greater detail:

... it makes absolutely no difference at all to anything new ... but all of our physical and mental patterns are made up from all the generations who have gone before, and left part of themselves inside our beings ... We know our 'us' is made up of so many bits from the past, we have so many connections with so many different people.¹¹ (A1706)

Here, finding out about ancestors long dead and gone requires legitimization, with the correspondent describing it as 'silly', self-indulgent and of potentially no consequence for the future. Despite this, the reach of previous generations extends to the present. The traces of the dead are tangible through the patterns which have been passed down through the generations and because the living are still connected to the dead through their inheritance of various 'bits' of those who have come before.

Genealogy is also accounted for as a tool by which to locate the specificity of an individual's life experiences in relation to the historical life experiences of family members. One male 41 year old observes, for example: 'I guess people do FHR to get a sense of "who they are": that is to place themselves in some sort of context'¹² (B3227). Correspondents describe their sense of being connected to their dead ancestors in various ways. One female 45 year old wrote of feeling part of a chain or network, back in time and forward into the future, which both rooted her and gave her a meaningful place in history¹³

(M1201). A 61-year-old woman comments: '... we make up a pattern and my name is part of it',¹⁴ (R860), while an 81-year-old man argues that 'Doing family histories gives one's own life depth, of belonging to a line which stretches back down the generations and forward',¹⁵ (G4313).

Being part of these connective schema, whether chain, network, pattern or line, so many correspondents claim, brings certainty of meaningfulness in the future, even immortality. It provides a sense of belonging 'in time' even when the sense of belonging to a geographical community is not or no longer possible. However, many correspondents noted that risks accompany this quest for blood connections. Never mind not liking *what* you find, you may not like *who* you find. One 40-year-old female observed: 'I was very interested in FHR but then decided I didn't like most of the people I'm related to, so have partially abandoned the research',¹⁶ (W3967).

Rejecting the Meaningfulness of Genealogy

There was a good response from those who were sceptical of the merits of genealogy. Correspondents offered a number of reasons for why genealogy did not interest them. A 56-year-old woman observed: 'I just want to keep all the family together, I am interested in my living relations more than the distant past',¹⁷ (D156). Another 36-year-old man thought that concentrating on genealogy was a risky or bad 'investment', representing little potential for gain: 'I do feel that concentrating one's efforts on ensuring you have a good today, and pursuing a better future is a better investment in time',¹⁸ (M4269). For some, investigating one's ancestors' past was meaningless and useless. One retired man wrote: 'FHR is going to change nothing, its [sic] all behind you. If it interests you fine, and if not fine. Self indulgence as it serves no useful purpose',¹⁹ (A883).

Many described genealogy as offering not understanding, but pointless narcissism, a way to explore, as one male 41-year-old put it, 'the contemporary researcher's fascinating ancestor' as 'a kind of true-life alter ego',²⁰ (B3277), while a female 43-year-old described genealogy as 'fulfil[ling] a desire for re-invention',²¹ (A3434). Here the exploration of the self through genealogical enquiry is disparaged for not representing an accurate engagement with the historical experience of the dead. Several described genealogy as a way to flatter the self. One 33-year-old woman commented: 'What I think we are really doing though, is looking for clues about our own characteristics, seeking a flattering reflection in a tarnished mirror to pep up the ego',²² (N3181), while a female 41-year-old similarly commented: 'Sometime I think people may do the research to flatter themselves – they love to find traits in their ancestor that they share ...',²³ (W3730).

Here, the genealogical imaginary which facilitates engagement and connection with the dead cannot be legitimate, given its ends are harnessed to the needs and desires of selves in the present. Not only is genealogy suspect in terms of the questionable historical methodology it uses, but also because its findings can only ever be limited, given its purpose is to explore the self, rather than the past.

Some correspondents could understand why other people would be drawn to family history, but professed themselves sufficiently secure in their own identity to be themselves interested. One male 74-year-old commented:

I'm not particularly interested in finding out more of my family tree, don't think it would help me 'know who I am'. As far as I'm concerned, I'm Me and that's enough, and I expect most of my family feel the same way about themselves.²⁴ (T2543)

Here the potential of genealogy to realize self-knowledge and strengthen identity is comprehensively rejected in favour of an identity expressed in individualist terms. However, this expression of individuality, of not 'needing' genealogy to know the self, is itself described as a collective identity, given that most of the correspondent's family is described as 'feeling' the same way. Here individuality is itself described as belonging and connectedness.

Some correspondents were cautious about engaging with genealogy because it might result in painful consequences. One 59-year-old woman was concerned that the genealogical imaginary resulted in a 'narrowing' of one's viewpoint, even promoting divisions amongst the living²⁵ (T1843). Others were concerned about the potential of genealogical enquiry to raise long-buried issues around paternity, and uncover deliberately concealed secrets. In these contexts, it seemed better to leave sleeping dogs lie: forgetting here is itself a deliberate act, a desire not to know.

Other correspondents simply didn't want treasured family stories or personal fantasies destroyed by the light of truth. One housewife in her thirties noted: '... once the mystery of your past is revealed there is no opportunity for fantasy – you can never be Russian royalty or a product of some great romance – and then you become just like everyone else'²⁶ (M3055). Here, far from providing fertile ground for creative imaginings of past realities, the genealogical imagination represents a closing-off of possibilities, and a reduction of the historical experience to the mundane and 'ordinary'.

Finally, there were those for whom connections by blood to the living were not that important. In this context, making connections with ancestors was seen as both undesirable and meaningless. One 40-something man commented with self-deprecating humour that he found living people hard enough to deal with, let alone having to relate to the dead as well²⁷ (G4304). Another 40-something male professed himself at a loss to understand why others could be so interested in their family history:

Quite why one's ancestry should be a subject of such fascination nowadays is a mystery to me – but then I have always considered my own family to be simply some people to whom I happen to be related. I certainly like them, but no more than I do my close friends. I just don't see how a blood link stretched by geography and time should still be so significant. People talk excitedly about heredity; I often joke that I would like to have inherited my grandfather's ability at jungle warfare ... I have not had the ability to find out if I have inherited this trait – though I do seem to have his hair.²⁸ (W3731)

Here the correspondent both stresses the random nature of biological connection, and emphasizes that alternative forms of sociality can be equally important. Closeness (however defined) is also important here: genealogy may create connections, but the bonds it creates can be 'stretched' too far in time and space to be adequately meaningful. This contrasts starkly with the descriptions above of genealogy offering a sense of 'belonging' in time and place to patterns and networks of meaning. At the same time, despite rejecting

the meaningfulness of genealogical knowledge, the correspondent is himself interested, even in a light-hearted way, in questions of heredity.

Genealogy, Disconnectedness and Conflict

Correspondents commonly also experienced rifts, disconnectedness or conflicting values with family members which many found painful. Several recounted how distant family members 'discovered' through genealogical research were not interested in maintaining a relationship after the initial contact. Correspondents had faced problems disclosing information because of conflicting values with the older generation around illegitimacy or shotgun marriages, or because siblings refused to disclose their findings. One 31-year-old man noted that family members could have the energy to discharge on genealogy, but not on maintaining links with close family members:

It is something of an annoyance to my mother that her own sister can travel to places like Amsterdam and Dublin to speak to a distant cousin she never knew existed but cannot get on a train to come and see her own sister as it is deemed too far.²⁹ (G4296)

Making and maintaining blood connections through genealogy is thus by no means straightforward in terms of the ways in which it enacts relatedness. Instead of connecting family members together, it can have painful consequences for living family members and serve to weaken, or at the very least test, existing bonds with the living.

Genealogical Affinities

Genealogical affinities surface in a number of ways in correspondents' responses to the Summer 2008 Directive. For reasons of space, I concentrate here on heritability and resemblance, and intangible or ethereal affinities.

Heritability and Resemblance

One of the ways in which correspondents describe and imagine relatedness with ancestors is through 'recognizing' (or not recognizing) shared family traits. The most obvious of these are physical resemblances. After meeting a distant relative found through genealogical research, one 56-year-old woman writes: 'when I visited D ... it took my breath away to see such a vivid resemblance to my grandmother. It was so wonderful to see Grandma again!'³⁰ (G2640). Here, the reoccurrence of particular physical characteristics associated with an individual is taken as evidence that the ancestor has not passed out of existence or meaningfulness, but has somehow been reconfigured 'within' another family member. In this case, this is both surprising and yet a joyful experience. Other correspondents noted that similar medical problems were likely to appear down the generations. However, inherited characteristics are not simply reducible to what we might call the biological realm. One 48-year-old woman observed: '...my maternal grandfather was ... from a tough mining family, hard as nails. I like to think I get my inner toughness from him as well as his fair hair and love of opera'³¹ (C3513). A female 77-year-old noted:

'[My children] now no doubt realize that, for example, their children's love of music, has been passed down through their ancestors, and their left-handedness and hayfever also "run" in the family, and their appearance'³² (B2605). In both these examples, inherited traits relate as much to personality and taste as to what we might understand as heritable biological resemblances, reflecting the permeability between the social and the biological in blood relationships (Carsten, 2000a).

Another 38-year-old man described the continuing relevance of the family's historic background for moulding their collective identity and ethos: 'I come from farming, horse-breeding/carter stock and I feel this explains my living family's plain speaking, no frills attitude to life'³³ (N3171). Here, historic ways of living and being in the world not only shape personalities and ways of living in the present, but continue to have the potential to shape how future generations live. The legacy of the past, as represented by ancestors' ways of being and living in the world, is not sublimated or concluded in the current generation, then, but simply represents its current incarnation, recast in one particular form, rather like a kaleidoscope.

Correspondents were also struck by what they described as uncanny coincidences down the generations which are explained as being no coincidence at all, but again reflective of some kind of familial 'essence' or makeup. Most often this related to the continued use of particular given names down the generations without prior knowledge of that name's importance in a family, or the reoccurrence of particular occupational choices down the generations. One 75-year-old woman wrote:

My grandfather was a legal clerk and interested in law and my son and my niece are both solicitors. My niece called her little boy Isaac not realizing until she saw the family tree that my great granddad had been called Isaac.³⁴ (J1890)

What is significant here is that, even without their knowing, individuals in the present day are repeating the patterns of the past. These choices then become constitutive of familial identity and solidified as familial destiny, even if these were in the first instance, individual choices, made without regard for the collective significance eventually attributed to them. Thus individual choices become reconfigured as signifiers of collective identity.

Intangible and Ethereal Affinities

Genealogy also has the capacity to express intangible or ethereal affinities. Connecting with the dead must mean connecting with an 'other-worldly' dimension, whether the other world in question refers to the world of past historical experience or the world of ghosts and hauntings. Although ethereal affinities surface only rarely in the correspondents' responses to the directive, when they do appear, they seem charged with an almost painful intensity. In particular, exploring and even 're-experiencing' ancestors' connections with places allows and legitimates selves in the present to make multiple connections with, and claim belonging to, meaningful places.

Given the importance of place, it is perhaps not surprising that correspondents repeatedly referred to the importance of 'rootedness', even when ambivalent or sceptical of

genealogy. However, it proved extremely difficult to describe and analyse. Correspondents were far better able to describe what a lack of roots might mean: for example, mobility, isolation, lack of identity. One 56-year-old man observed that: '[family history research] has given me a solid feeling of my family's roots and that is satisfying in a personal way I find hard to describe'³⁵ (H3821). Rootedness often seemed to be accompanied by what correspondents described as 'pride' in their heritage. However, roots are not only attached to blood connections: one 62-year-old adopted woman noted that roots could be successfully 'grafted on'³⁶ (M3408).

'Finding' meaningful places through genealogy allowed genealogical researchers to claim belonging where ordinarily they would not 'fit'. One 73-year-old woman noted:

... although I was born and grew up in the Birmingham area, I never felt like a Midlander deep down and through my research I have found most of my roots are in Cheshire and some in the farm lands of Staffordshire.³⁷ (B786)

Here the 'feeling' that one does not fit is not sufficient in itself to justify belonging elsewhere: alternative geographical locations can only be rendered equally meaningful as places of 'rootedness' because they are associated with ancestors. Genealogy can therefore allow the self to root itself 'elsewhere', but it also legitimates the feeling of 'not fitting' in the first place.

Other correspondents experienced connectedness with their ancestors through the sensory experience of recreating their actions, or simply returning to meaningful places. For one 65-year-old woman, this included walking in her ancestors' footsteps:

I visited Makeney (where ancestors had lived) ... Close to the Hall is a lovely old track, a Holloway, leading to the road in the next village. My forebears must have used this road and it was a strange experience to walk where they would have walked.³⁸ (B1475)

Or it might mean returning to the same places as her ancestors, by coincidence:

... my maternal grandfather ... was ... in lodgings ... in the next street to the WEA college I often attend. It is strange that we should both come to almost the same place. I remember him well – he was a lovely old man – and I could almost sense his presence when I went to the site of the house.³⁹ (B1475)

This correspondent uses the word 'strange' here in two passages to relate to two things. First, there is the strangeness of it being possible to 're-experience' what past ancestors might have experienced, given the distance in time and experience between the present-self and those ancestors. Second is the strangeness that these places can still be marked by the physical presence of ancestors. This is the strangeness that these places can still, in our modern world, offer the possibility of glimpsing not only the traces of past generations, but the ghosts of those generations themselves.

Another 77-year-old man noted the 'strange' feeling he experienced in relation to a box of photos he had been given by his late Uncle B's daughter:

... let me relate a strange experience that I had earlier this year; an experience that has even now left me feeling slightly uneasy ...

I found myself slightly nauseated by the faint perfume given off by the photographs and I realized that I didn't relish touching them again. The feeling I had was unease. I sat there puzzling why I should feel as I did and began to think that *interference* with these long-dead people whose images lay before me was strongly resented ... I was still alive and they were dead. They did indeed need to be left to rest in peace.⁴⁰ (B1654) (emphasis in original)

This correspondent does not know how to make sense of this experience, and is himself rather disparaging of what he calls the 'doubtful world of spooks and fairies'. Nevertheless, it seems clear that he has experienced a supernatural dis-affinity: he feels 'warned off' further investigation of the documents and decides to put them aside for his daughter, who will not be informed of his uneasiness. Even though these people are long dead and gone, their reach continues to extend to the present: they still have the power to shape behaviour.

Conclusion

This sample is not representative, and is composed of a larger percentage of responses from the over fifties, the south-east, and women. Although the apparent surge of interest in genealogy has broadened its appeal in the last 10 to 15 years, the Mass Observation panel matches the original social profile of genealogists well. However, the sample also includes those who are not, or no longer, practising genealogy, as well as those who are either ambivalent or actively hostile towards it. As such, it reflects the opinions both of genealogists and of non-genealogists, giving a wider insight into the role of genealogy in personal lives than a focus solely on family historians might afford. However, given the correspondents' abiding passion for social history, the critiques levelled at genealogy and the genealogical imaginary tend to involve its suspect methodology. It would therefore be instructive to sample those members of the population who are not comparably invested in social history, to see if alternative critiques are offered. Further, given the lack of responses which refer to issues of 'race' and ethnicity in correspondents' own families, it seems probable that the sample is exclusively white. Given the socially differentiated outcomes of genealogy, further research is clearly needed to examine the role of genealogy in non-white families.

Based on the evidence from the response to the 2008 Mass Observation Directive on Family History Research, I want to suggest that genealogy is put to at least three major uses in personal life. First, it can be used to map connectedness through blood.⁴¹ However, this is not a straightforward process. Close blood relatives can be discounted as meaningful, whereas ancestors distant in time or degree of relation can be recuperated and rendered meaningful to the self in the present. Ancestors are also deliberately forgotten or genealogy itself rejected where mapping and exploring connectedness might be problematic, for example where paternity might be at issue. Genealogical connectedness is thus less prescriptive than selective. Second, genealogy – and ancestors – are used as a resource for identity-work. Thus the self, and individuality, is itself constituted through

(dis)embeddedness in kinship networks. Relatedness and self-identity are co-produced through an always ongoing process of 'recognizing' (dis)affinities with related others. These affinities are always both social and biological, reflecting the permeability of the two categories. Third, genealogy allows belonging in time and connectedness across the generations, as well as belonging in new, or newly reconfigured places of significance. It therefore provides meaningfulness beyond the here and now, providing selves in the present with a geographical and/or temporal 'place to stand'.

I also want to suggest that the dead play a central role in personal life, though they may be long gone, and even sometimes never personally encountered within their lifetime. As a form of memorialization, family history clearly facilitates relationships between the living and the dead (Hallam and Hockey, 2001). First, the dead remain social agents with the capability to influence behaviour in the present. As part of the genealogical imaginary, and through the process of mapping affinities, their characteristics and habits offer the self a resource for identity-work in the present. However, this can also be experienced as a burden, where the imagined weight of expectation is too heavy. Second, the dead can also 're-appear' in the present. This may take the form of a haunting or the feeling of the dead's presence, which is often closely related to their association with meaningful places. More commonly, the dead re-appear in and through the living through the re-emergence of tangible resemblances which have passed down the generations. However, despite the importance of the dead in personal life, their continuing importance must be accounted for and legitimated, given that social death is expected to accompany biological death.

This article has found that that embeddedness and 'rootedness' remain extremely important and foundational to identity. Family history or genealogy allows people to produce, express and/or deny kinship, affinity and connectedness between themselves as individuals and their close family and wider kin, both within and across the generations. Given its selectivity, the genealogical imaginary then functions as a tool through which the ties of kinship can be both acknowledged *and* disavowed; for although it works within a model of kinship where blood ties remain of primary importance, such ties can be, and are, rejected as meaningful as and when necessary. Family history thus clearly demonstrates the creative and negotiated dimension of kinship; it also suggests the often surprising degree of positive and negative emotional investments such negotiations can afford. The pleasure and the joy here (as well as the antipathy and the hostility) is as much in the *process* of negotiating kinship as in the (dis)embeddedness and (un)rootedness such negotiations can afford. In other words, people take as much pleasure in *making* themselves connected and rooted, as in *being* rooted and connected.

Research into 'non-conventional' kinship, for example kinship through donor insemination and adoption, has suggested that personhood in these cases is often understood as fractured and/or inauthentic, provoking a form of 'identity crisis'. However, it is precisely because identity is (for the most part) understood to be partial and insufficiently secure(d) that 'rootedness' is so important. Like unconventional kinship, conventional kinship similarly compels people to engage with the meaning and legacy of inheritance for collective and individual identification and identity. I would contend then that, as a creative and imaginative memory practice, exploring one's family history simply renders visible what is in fact an everyday facet of personal life. Rather than exposing the

fragility of family ties, the passion for, *as well as* the hostility *against*, genealogy reveals that individual identity remains firmly anchored to, and rooted within, kinship networks, and that kinship itself remains fascinating and central to personal lives.

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Notes

- 1 The Mass Observation Project can also be referred to as the MO Project, or the MO-A project.
- 2 Male, 81, widower, retired teacher, Tunbridge Wells. Biographical details have been formatted for consistency, but are sometimes incomplete or feature additional information.
- 3 Female, retired, living on the south coast.
- 4 Male, 78, married, retired clergyman, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
- 5 Female, 70, married, retired civil servant, near Bath.
- 6 Female, born 1920s, married, retired statistician, Chorley.
- 7 Female, 78, widowed, retired civil servant, Essex.
- 8 Female, 52, married, local government officer, East Sussex.
- 9 Male, 38, single, lecturer, Walthamstow.
- 10 Female, 58, married, retired teacher, Stone, Staffs.
- 11 Female, 61, artist, Shoreham-by-Sea.
- 12 Male, 41, single, university administrator, Birmingham.
- 13 Female, 45, married, ex-civil servant and unpublished writer, Chester le Street.
- 14 Female, 61, married with son, retired lecturer and JP, Cheshire.
- 15 Male, 81, married, radio broadcaster/lecturer.
- 16 Female, 40, cohabiting, database manager, Liverpool.
- 17 Female, 56, married, manageress of florist shop, south east 'born and bred'.
- 18 Male, 36, married, IT consultant, Gawcott (village near Buckingham).
- 19 Male, 75, married with son and daughter, retired architect, Chelmsford.
- 20 Male, 41, single, university administrator, Birmingham.
- 21 Female, 43, married with 5-year-old son, stay at home mother, formerly stockbroker, Winchester.
- 22 Female, 33, married, librarian, Leeds.
- 23 Female, 41, married, CAB money adviser, Beverley.
- 24 Female, 74, single retired library asst, Dudley W Mids.
- 25 Female, 59, divorced, caseworker, Disley.
- 26 Female, 34, married, housewife, Sierra Leone.
- 27 Male, 44, single, stock photographer, Bedworth.
- 28 Male, 41, married, translator, Beverley.
- 29 Male, 31, living with partner, radio archive cataloguer, Cardiff.
- 30 Female, 56, divorced, librarian, Hounslow.
- 31 Female, 48, married with three children, housewife, Essex.
- 32 Female, 77, married with children, grandchildren and great grandchild, ex-civil servant, Staines.
- 33 Male, 38, single, lecturer, Walthamstow.
- 34 Female, 75, married, Hull.
- 35 Male, 56, married, teacher, Malvern.

- 36 Female, 62, married, retired nursery teacher, Coventry.
- 37 Female, 73, married, PA, Barnstaple.
- 38 Female, 65, single, retired auditor, Chesterfield.
- 39 Female, 65, single, retired auditor, Chesterfield.
- 40 Male, 77, married and living with wife, pensioner, former editorial manager with a Scottish newspaper, Rugeley, Staffs.
- 41 Correspondents noted that genealogy also fosters collaboration and sociality outside blood connections, for example through engagement with like-minded individuals at archives and through family history societies.

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